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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3812
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1060
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3884
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1117
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000829

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SUBJECT: AKASHI PLEDGES CONTINUED JAPANESE AID TO SRI LANKA

REF: COLOMBO 805

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a briefing to Co-Chair Ambassadors on June 8, Japanese Special Envoy Yasushi Akashi found Colombo more polarized and pessimistic when he arrived on June 5 than he had seen in any of his 14 previous visits. By the end of his visit, he was only slightly more optimistic. In response to a private exhortation by Opposition Leader Wickremesinghe for Japan to suspend its economic assistance, Akashi told Wickremesinghe and later reiterated publicly that the Sri Lankan people should not be punished "for acts of commission and omission by their leaders." President Rajapaksa emphasized to Akashi the government's readiness to investigate all human rights violations and support the Commission of Inquiry, but said that the "complete revamping" of the Sri Lankan legal system that some eminent persons were seeking would not be possible. Rajapaksa repeated his pledge to support whatever consensus proposal emerges from the APRC process and pledged to do his best to persuade the people of Sri Lanka to support such a proposal. JVP Leader Amerasinghe told Akashi that while the JVP is opposed to the devolution process, it will support a consensus APRC proposal provided such a proposal receives popular approval either through a referendum or a majority vote in parliament. End Summary.

Meeting with President Rajapaksa

¶2. (C) According to Akashi, President Rajapaksa thanked the international community and NGOs for the work they are doing to help resettle IDPs in eastern Sri Lanka. The President said Sri Lanka is trying to reestablish law and order in that part of the country. He also expressed his hope to organize elections in the east, but did not provide a time frame or target date. In response to the President's request for additional Japanese assistance to help rehabilitate the resettled IDPs, Akashi said that it would be very important for the Government to establish law, order and good governance, which would help facilitate such assistance.

Akashi turned the subject to human rights noting the importance of the work of the Commission of Inquiry (COI). He asked for the President's continued commitment to the work of the COI and requested a thorough investigation into the abduction and killing of two Red Cross workers (reftel). President Rajapaksa emphasized the government's readiness to investigate all human rights violations and support the COI. The President added that some of the eminent persons observing the COI appear to be seeking a complete revamping of the Sri Lankan legal system which the President said was unrealistic and would not be possible. Akashi defended the work of the eminent persons and told the President that Sri Lanka needs to prove itself on the human rights front.

13. (C) Akashi informed Rajapaksa of the importance Japan attaches to the All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) process to develop a devolution proposal. Repeating what he told A/S Boucher in May, the President responded that the ruling SLFP Party would support whatever consensus emerges from the process. He also pledged to do his best to persuade the people of Sri Lanka to support the consensus proposal. The President expressed his personal view that district-level devolution would be in the best interest of the country, but made it clear he was prepared to accept the idea of provincial-level devolution in the north. He also reassured Akashi that there could be no military solution to Sri Lanka's conflict. The President asked for the international community's help to pressure the LTTE to come back to negotiations.

UNP Leader Bitter, JVP Shift

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14. (C) Akashi then described his conversations with other political party leaders on the APRC process. He said that JVP Leader Amerasinghe had told him that while the JVP is opposed to the devolution process, it will support a consensus APRC proposal provided such a proposal receives popular approval either through a referendum or a majority vote in parliament. (Note: the JVP subsequently reiterated this publicly.) Akashi commented that this was a constructive change in the JVP's stance. In his meeting with opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, Akashi emphasized the need for the UNP and SLFP to work together in the APRC. However, Akashi found the opposition leader to be very bitter about the abrogation of the UNP-SLFP MOU following the crossover of several prominent UNP ministers to the Government. Ranil told Akashi that unless the crossovers are removed from their cabinet positions, he would not consider rapprochement with the ruling party. The opposition leader expressed confidence that the government would face mounting difficulties in the months to come, giving the UNP a good chance to come to power.

IDP Conditions Improving in the East

15. (C) Akashi visited Batticaloa, Vakarai, and Trincomalee during his trip. In a meeting with IDPs who had been resettled out of Batticaloa, Akashi commented that while the IDPs had concerns about possible LTTE efforts to re-infiltrate into the east, it was clear their lives had improved. He commented that the activities in the east of the Karuna Group remain a serious problem. NGOs had expressed grave concerns about Karuna extortion and other harassment and intimidation. The military commander in Batticaloa told Akashi that the Karuna Group is forbidden from carrying arms in Vakarai and that efforts are being made to re-establish government control over law and order in other parts of the east. In Vakarai, Akashi commented that the IDPs showed signs of long suffering. They are frightened of changes they do not understand, he pointed out. Summing up his impressions, Akashi told us he found Sri Lanka more polarized and pessimistic than ever when he arrived, and he

was only moderately more optimistic after four days in the country.

Comment

¶6. (C) Ambassador thanked Akashi for his briefing and commented that the APRC process faces two key challenges: first, partisan bitterness between Ranil and the President and Ranil's hopes to bring down the government in the fall, make UNP cooperation in the APRC questionable. However, Ranil has been talking for months about bringing down the government and appears no closer now to his goal. The Co-Chairs therefore had to encourage Ranil to cooperate constructively in the APRC for the sake of the country. The second key challenge will be for the President personally to embrace and actively market whatever consensus proposal emerges from the APRC. Akashi and others agreed with this assessment and agreed we should discuss this further when the Co-Chairs meet in Oslo later this month.

BLAKE